

The Vampire 1051

Chapter 1051: Jocelynn's Struggle (Part Three)

"She, she what?" Jocelynn said as her stomach twisted and tied itself into knots. Percivus had timed his revelation carefully, waiting until Jocelynn was licking the bowl clean before revealing that the meal had come from Eleanor and that her cousin was suffering in order to provide it to her. Now, Jocelynn couldn't give the food back if she wanted to, and Percivus knew it.

"She's been very stubborn about keeping your secrets," Percivus said, hanging his head in a show of disappointment. "But no one can endure forever. It might have taken a few days with a lash in a cell that isn't as warm or luxurious as yours, but she's finally learned that it's better to cooperate with the Inquisition than to defy it," he said.

His hardened hazel eyes seemed to bore into Jocelynn's trembling eyes, and the corner of his lips turned upward in the faintest of genuine smiles when he saw moisture collecting in her eyes as she imagined what Eleanor must have endured these past several days.

"So you do have some concern in your heart for your cousin, Eleanor," he said, clicking his tongue and shaking his head at her. "So it's only the sister you're jealous of that you can't bring yourself to worry about. But of course, you'll never have to compete with Eleanor for the attention of a man you fancy, so I suppose that makes her safe from your schemes, doesn't it, Jocelynn?"

"Don't you dare hurt her!" Jocelynn spat, and with tremendous effort, she pushed herself up from the cot.

The sudden movement sent her chains rattling, the sound echoing in the small cell. Pain shot through her raw, bruised ankle as the iron cuff shifted, and her wrists screamed in protest as she braced her hands on the cot to lever herself upright.

For a moment, she swayed, dizzy from hunger and the sudden change in position. Her head swam, and her vision faded to darkness at the edges in a way that had nothing to do with the faint light within the dungeon.

Still, she forced herself to stand, to draw herself up to her full height despite the way her weakened legs trembled beneath her. She was still slightly taller than Percivus, something that seemed to irritate the

powerful man who was shorter than either of his acolytes, and she used every inch of that height now, refusing to cower before the Inquisitor.

For days, her posture had grown more bent and slumped as the chains dragged at her, and she had to bring the embroidery close to her face to make sure she wasn't making any mistakes the acolytes might notice. The constant hunching over the workbench, with the cold and hunger and exhaustion, had made her appear smaller, more fragile, more timid.

She'd felt herself shrinking, felt the proud noblewoman her father had raised being worn away like water eroding stone. The acolytes' casual cruelties, the constant hunger, the bone-deep cold, the pain from her wounds, all of it had been designed to make her smaller, to reduce her from Lady Jocelynn Blackwell to something lesser.

He wanted to reduce her to something broken and compliant, like the abused housewife of a poor drunkard. He wanted to turn her into someone who could never threaten a small man like Percivus or make him feel like he was somehow lesser than the young noblewoman he'd thrown into the depths of the dungeons.

But as soon as Percivus talked about hurting Eleanor, something buried within her flared to life. You could cover up a fire with dirt, and the flames might go out, but the embers still burned underneath, and the fire hadn't been extinguished. The same could be said for the pride and presence of a noblewoman that Jocelynn possessed.

Percivus had worn her down, had stripped away her fine clothes and her comfort and even her dignity. He had reduced her to a shivering wretch bent over embroidery in the dim light of a flickering torch in a damp dungeon cell. But he had yet to obliterate the essence of who Jocelynn was. Breaking a nobleman could take months, and despite his cruelty, he'd refused to rush things with Jocelynn Blackwell.

Now, that refusal manifested in a resurgence of the young woman's strength and defiance. Standing there in her rough peasant's dress, her wrists bleeding and her body wasted from hunger, chained to the wall like an animal, she still managed to look down at Percivus with something approaching the majesty of Count Rhys Blackwell's daughter.

For a fleeting moment, Percivus was struck with the illusion that she had transformed herself into some kind of ruffian sea captain, standing atop the unsteady deck of a wave-tossed ship and refusing to yield before the might of a storm, and he took a small, half step backwards when he was struck by the intensity of her gaze.

"I see that someone hasn't learned their new place in the world," Percivus said, shaking his head to rid himself of the momentary feeling of inferiority the captive noblewoman had dredged up from deep within his heart before turning toward the door. "Talking when you're like this would be useless," he called over his shoulder as he began to leave.

"Instead, I'll give you the night to consider the best way to help your cousin," Percivus said. "It isn't impossible to fetch a healer from the Temple for her, you know. I have many questions to ask you in the morning. If your answers are at least as satisfactory as Eleanor's, I might be convinced to summon one of those healers. Her life could still be preserved."

"Think about it, Jocelynn," he said as he left the dungeon cell. "Her life is in your hands..."

Left alone in the darkness of her cell, Jocelynn felt as though the warmth in her stomach had turned into a flaming ember, burning her up from within. Eleanor was dying... and it was all her fault.

The dam within her that had held her tears back whenever she confronted Percivus or his lackeys finally shattered, and twin rivers of salty tears flowed down her cheeks as sobs shook her body.

All of this was her fault, and it had been her fault from the very beginning. The moment she told Owain about the mark on Ashlynn's hip, she'd doomed her beloved sister to die. Then, when she'd finally realized the sort of monster she'd deceived herself into falling in love with, her attempts to free herself from this nightmare doomed not just herself, but the kindest, most loving companion she'd ever had.

Eleanor was far more than just her chaperone, and much closer to her than any of her other distant cousins. She was family in a way that went beyond the labels of a family tree, and the bond between them had transcended the boundaries of their relative stations long ago.

Eleanor had become a pillar of support that she relied on, a confidant whom she could confide in, an advisor whom she trusted more than she trusted herself at times... and the very best friend that Jocelynn could ever ask for. A far better one than she deserved.

And now, Eleanor was dying in a dank dungeon cell... because of her. Because she'd tried to manipulate Bors Lothian when she realized that he'd mistaken her for his long-lost wife in the delusions of his

illness. Because she'd thought that she could outsmart the Lothians in the middle of their own territory to escape the delusional father and his violent, controlling son...

It was all her fault, and in the darkness of her cell, there was nothing that could distract her from that cold, bitter truth.

She didn't know how long she sat and wept. It felt like an eternity, long enough that the silvery moonlight had faded away, leaving only the dim light of the stars in the night sky outside her tiny window.

But then, as she felt herself sinking deeper and deeper into the abyss of self-loathing for what she had done, a golden, flickering light appeared beside the door, pushing back the darkness and revealing a familiar figure who couldn't possibly be here...

Chapter 1052: Eleanor's Gift

Jocelynn had to blink several times, using the rough woolen sleeve of her dress to scrub the tears from her eyes before she could make sense of the miraculous sight before her eyes.

Flickering golden light filled her cell, emanating from Eleanor's radiant figure where her cousin stood just inside the door of her cell. But the Eleanor she saw before her wasn't the Eleanor who had been thrown into the dungeon several days ago. Her face was fresh and youthful, lacking any of the wrinkles, dark circles under her eyes, or the sunken cheeks that had distorted her features ever since she used a miracle to save Jocelynn's life.

The Eleanor in Jocelynn's cell stood tall and confident, wearing her golden Confessor's robes with the crimson hood of her order. But at her waist, where she would have normally worn a simple waist cincher or corset, she instead wore a crimson sash in the style of sailor, embroidered with the three sails and crossed harpoon and anchor of the Blackwell family crest.

Golden flames surrounded Eleanor's entire body, like a holy aura of flame that banished the cold from the dungeon cell along with the darkness that had threatened to consume Jocelynn. That same flickering light, however, made it clear that the Eleanor who had entered Jocelynn's cell wasn't entirely present, either in this cell or in the world of the living as Jocelynn could see the stones of her cell through Eleanor's translucent figure.

"E-eleanor?" Jocelynn said in a soft voice that trembled with fear, as if any sound she made would banish the figure of the woman who had come to visit her. "Am, am I dreaming?" Jocelynn asked.

"No," Eleanor said gently as she crossed the room to kneel on the cold stone floor beside Jocelynn. "I wish you could wake from this nightmare, but this is no dream."

"Then, you, you're..." Jocelynn stammered, unable to speak the words as tears flooded her eyes again.

"Soon," Eleanor said, reaching out to wipe away Jocelynn's tears, her ephemeral hand bringing warmth and comfort that went beyond simple human touch. "I cannot last much longer, so I've made my choice. What little life I have left is my gift to you, to help you survive this horrible man."

"I'm sorry," Eleanor added, bowing her head low as she found it difficult to meet Jocelynn's tear filled gaze. "I've already betrayed your trust once, and if I stayed, I'm sure I'd falter again. This way, even though it's cowardly, at least I can do something to help you before my end. I can give you what strength I have left so you..."

"No!" Jocelynn protested. She tried to wrap her arms around Eleanor's luminous, ephemeral figure but her arms passed through the apparition as though she was made of smoke, leaving behind only a faint feeling of warmth in her cold, cramped hands, as if she'd held them before the flames of the hearth.

"No, you can't die!" Jocelynn wailed. "You have to stay with me! I don't want your strength," she sobbed. "I want you. I need you. Without you, I'll be all alone... I, I never would have made it this far without you and... and..."

Once again, words failed her as Jocelynn stared at the radiant figure of the woman who had come to mean almost as much to her as her own mother... and in some ways, more. Her heart felt like it had been torn from her chest, clutched by the cruelest hand imaginable and held out before her so she could watch its final, feeble beats.

"Please," Jocelynn pleaded as she struggled to stand. "I'll call out for Percivus... He, he promised to summon a healer for you if I told him what he wanted... If I tell him, if the Church can send a healer, then you can..."

"It's too late, Jocelynn," Eleanor said, holding up a hand before the grief stricken woman. "My life is the price for this miracle, and I've paid it gladly. Nothing can change that, so look at me," she said, placing a finger under the young woman's chin and turning her head away from the door so she could look directly into Jocelynn's limpid seafoam eyes one last time.

"I love you, cousin," Eleanor said as she gently stroked the other woman's flat, limp hair that had lost much of its usual luster. "No matter what happens in the days to come, remember that I loved you enough to do this, and that you are worthy of being loved. I know that will be hard," she whispered. "But please try. Don't let men like Percivus and Owain take away the love your heart is capable of."

"I, I'll try," Jocelynn promised feebly, though it was hard to say that she meant the words. She'd already caused her sister's death, and now her cousin's. She was a curse who brought about nothing but disaster, so how could a woman like her ever be worthy of love?

But those weren't words she could speak to Eleanor... not at a moment like this, and not ever again, so she promised that she would try. It was the most she could do.

"Good girl," Eleanor said, wrapping her ghostly arms around her young cousin and holding her close one last time. "Now, you're free of the burden of protecting me, and having my weakness used against you. Use that, and all of the strength I have left to resist that man and escape this place."

"I know the path ahead is dark," she said softly. "But I'll light the way for you, for as long as I can. I love you, cousin," she said as her voice grew faint, sounding like it was coming from somewhere impossibly far away. "So remember that, and don't forget to love yourself...."

With her final words, Eleanor's figure was finally consumed by the nimbus of golden flames, burning like a funeral pyre to light her way to the Heavenly Shores. But when Eleanor's figure had faded away entirely, the flames didn't recede. Instead, they burned brighter than ever before, flowing around Jocelynn to envelop her in an embrace as warm and tender as Eleanor's.

Under the gentle warmth of the golden flames, the wounds on Jocelynn's wrists, feet, and hands melted away as though they'd never been there. Her haggard and worn features softened again while the dark circles faded from her eyes. The sensation of hunger that constantly gnawed at her belly these past several days faded away like a message written on the sands, washed away by warm summer waves.

The cold of the room faded slowly, replaced by a warmth that flowed from within, suffusing her body with a quiet, gentle strength that it had never possessed even before this nightmare began. Moments later, the warmth had soothed the aches of her joints and the pains of her muscles, leaving her refreshed, renewed, and ready to face whatever struggles lay ahead.

Only then, when she had been not only healed from the ravages of the past several days, but fortified against the struggles to come, did the golden flames fade away, leaving Jocelynn all alone in the dark cell.

Tears still rolled down her youthful cheeks, and silent sobs shook her body. No miracle could soothe the ragged hurt where her heart had been savaged by the cruelest loss she'd faced yet... But come morning, when Percivus returned, Jocelynn would face him with a renewed strength and a conviction unlike any she'd possessed before.

She was a cursed woman, one who brought only tragedies to the people who loved her. But Eleanor had loved her despite that, and she'd given her life to give Jocelynn a chance to escape Percivus. She might not be strong enough to love herself the way her cousin wanted to her... but she'd be hanged as a heretic before she would throw away the chance that Eleanor had sacrificed her life for.

Somehow, she thought, clenching her fist in the darkness of her cell. Somehow, she'd find a way to escape all this... And then, if she was very, very lucky, she'd find a way to make Percivus pay for taking away one of the people she treasured most in this life.

Somehow, she'd make sure he suffered as much as she and Eleanor had... and then, she would claim his life, just like his cruelty had claimed Eleanor's.

Chapter 1053: Distant Family

A soft emerald light spilled from the crystal lamp on Ashlynn's bedside table as she snuggled into Nyrielle's gentle embrace. Her lover's body was still warm from the bath, and she smelled of lavender and jasmine soap along with a softer, subtler scent that belonged to Nyrielle alone.

Following Ashlynn's gathering with her coven, she'd left Isabell to become better acquainted with Ollie and Virve while she withdrew to spend the evening with Nyrielle. Both the vampire and her witch carried their share of anxieties about the attack on Hanrahan town and while they were confident that Dame Sybyll and Heila had won the day, neither of them knew what price they'd paid to do it.

If they were fortunate, a messenger would arrive before dawn with detailed news, but how quickly word would arrive depended greatly on which of Sybyll's forces had survived the battle. If casualties had been high, or if the town refused to submit, it might be another day or more before word would arrive.

Nyrielle could have raced south at sunset to search the night for a messenger, but even with her power, finding one person on horseback riding through the night would have been difficult, and she would have to abandon her darling Ashlynn to do so.

Instead, once the sun set, she pulled Ashlynn away to join her for a warm bath, a quiet meal, and an evening spent in each other's arms. If the messenger arrived before dawn then Zedya could rouse them, but for now, simple closeness felt like the best remedy for anxious hearts.

"What are you thinking about, my darling?" Nyrielle asked as she ran her fingers through Ashlynn's soft, pale-blond hair. She could feel her lover's heartbeat, both through the skin of their bodies where they touched and the echo of Ashlynn's heartbeat within her own chest, and despite her best efforts, there was an unsteadiness to her lover's heartbeat and breathing that refused to fade.

"What's troubling you, that you can't set aside even now?" Nyrielle asked gently as she wrapped an arm around Ashlynn's slender waist, pulling their bodies closer together under the blankets of the bed they shared.

"Promise you won't be jealous if I say I'm thinking about another woman," Ashlynn teased, rolling over in bed so she could meet Nyrielle's midnight gaze. "I was thinking about Isabell and her warning," she admitted. "I'm worried about what comes next and the people who will get caught up in it no matter what we do... I, I'm worried about my parents," she admitted, closing her eyes with a heavy sigh and pressing her forehead against Nyrielle's brow.

"Do you want to rescue them?" Nyrielle asked gently. "If your mother is in one of the Church's convents as your newest witch says, it might prove difficult to carry her away, but if I go myself..."

"No," Ashlynn said quickly, wrapping her arms around Nyrielle's lithe body and pulling her close. "No, I need you here. I need you close," she whispered as she clung to her lover with both her arms and her legs, tangling them together under the warmth of the blankets.

"Will your mother be safe in the confines of the convent?" Nyrielle asked, pulling back from Ashlynn enough to look into her emerald eyes. "If you think they'll turn against her..."

"The convent is full of Confessors, like my cousin Eleanor," Ashlynn said, furrowing her brow as she wrestled with the worries in her heart to approach the question logically. "It isn't like the Inquisition. Even if they think my mother has gone astray for raising me, they'll shelter her so that she can find a way to atone for giving birth to a 'great evil' like me," Ashlynn reasoned.

"Confessors only surrender heretics if they pose an active threat to the people or the Church," Ashlynn explained. "But if my mother is considered to be guilty of anything, it's unleashing me upon the world. Now that I've left home, my mother doesn't pose a threat to anyone. They should care for her instead of handing her over to the Inquisition."

Ashlynn's mother, Maela, had always said the convent in DuCoudmont County was like a second home to her, and it wasn't far from her family in DuCoudmont City. Even if the convent wasn't entirely comfortable sheltering the mother of a witch, she was also the younger sister of the current Count DuCoudmont, and that should provide an additional measure of protection for her, or at least, Ashlynn hoped it would.

"And your father?" Nyrielle prompted. "Keating City is much closer than Blackwell, and the Church's presence there is much stronger. If your father is still in the duchy when word of your victory reaches the Duke..."

"He won't be," Ashlynn said firmly. "Whether he secures an agreement with Duke Keating or not, he'll be back in Blackwell by Midwinter's Night. We're Blackwells," Ashlynn said with a wry smile. "We're sensitive to time and tide and he knows better than to get stuck away from home because he didn't leave before the winter rains and snows."

"It's harder to fetch him from Blackwell than from Keating," Nyrielle said as she considered the options that were available to her. "Marcell's spies outside of Lothian March can't be relied on to do more than gather information and pass it along."

The Black Merchant's network extended to almost every corner of the Kingdom of Gaal, but outside of Lothian March, most of them were little more than trusted listeners, many of whom believed that their mysterious patron was one of the local lords, spying on a rival. They took a few silver coins a year and passed along what they learned, but they were nothing like the assassins that Marcell trained in Lothian March.

After all, most of the people Marcell trained as assassins were descendants of his siblings or other, more distant members of his family. The Black Merchant had learned well to keep his circle of trust small and to expand it only when he had a great need, even if that meant losing opportunities to recruit capable subordinates.

But thinking of blood kin brought another name to mind, one that had only come up rarely in her conversations with Ashlynn as they planned her lover's vengeance against the Lothians.

"I could send Narcissa," Nyrielle offered. "It would take time for a message to reach her, but once it does, she could meet your father in Blackwell. If nothing else, she could offer him protection until you can speak with him directly."

Ashlynn's breath caught in her throat as Nyrielle offered to move the most distant, and in a way, the most precious among her progeny. Thane might be the greatest of her progeny, the one who Nyrielle had hoped would one day grow into a true partner for her, but Narcissa was something else entirely.

And, while Narcissa's mission was arguably one of the most dangerous and most important ones that Nyrielle had given to any of her progeny, it was also a mission that kept her the furthest from the wars that had come to define Lothian March and the Vale of Mists.

"Thank you," Ashlynn said as she realized once again how far Nyrielle was prepared to go to protect her and her loved ones. "But I can't ask you to get her tangled up in this just yet. Besides, we'll need the support of 'Lady Willowcreek' in the Royal Capital not long after word of what we've done reaches Blackwell County. That's danger enough for her, don't you think?"

"She's never been safe, so far away from me, even with Philosar to provide a safe haven for her if she's exposed," Nyrielle said gently as she stroked Ashlynn's soft, silky hair. "I'm confident that she could reach your father and return with him, but afterward," she said, sighing as she acknowledged one of Ashlynn's points. "I don't know that she'd be able to safely return to the Royal Capital."

"Then let her stay in the place where she's made a home," Ashlynn said, pulling Nyrielle close and resting her head on the other woman's chest. "She may prefer it that way, just like my father might choose to stay in Blackwell," Ashlynn said softly. "We shouldn't rip them away from the lives they have unless we need to."

There were no easy answers to the dilemmas that faced them, but as much as Ashlynn's instincts cried out for her to protect the people she loved, and to bring her family close, she also knew that tearing them away from their lives without giving them a choice might forever damage the love they had for her.

Ashlynn knew all too well how painful it could be to be torn away from the world she'd known all her life, and she didn't want to inflict that pain on anyone else if she could avoid it. It would have been easier if everyone wasn't so far away, but soon, things would change, at least a little bit.

The time for hiding was coming to an end, and once she could move openly, nothing would stop her from reaching out to the people she loved, and one day soon, she hoped that she would be able to hold them in her arms again.

At the same time, she hoped that Nyrielle would have an opportunity to see Narcissa again soon... Now that her vampire lover's heart had reawakened, Ashlynn was certain that a part of her longed to reunite with her only remaining blood kin just as much as Ashlynn wanted to reunite with her family.

But to do that, they had to find a way to handle the Kingdom of Gaal... And that would be even more difficult than rescuing Ashlynn's mother from a convent in DuCoumont County and her father from the family home in Blackwell...

Chapter 1054: The Strength To Do More

For several heartbeats, Nyrielle just held her lover close, giving Ashlynn the time to process her fears and worries. Isabell's warning had pried open a wound that was still tender and fresh, but she and Ashlynn had discussed their fears for her family before. Little had changed between the last time they'd had this conversation and now, but Ashlynn's heart was too riddled with hurts and fears to separate them neatly into problems that could be solved and wounds to be tended.

Eventually, however, her lover needed to confront the part of Isabell's warning that stirred up everything else within her heart, or Ashlynn would sink into another series of nightmares as she tried to shoulder burdens far beyond what even a powerful witch could bear.

"Ashlynn, my darling," Nyrielle whispered, prodding her lover out of her spiraling thoughts. "You said that you were worried about the warning Isabell carried," she reminded her. "But the worries you spoke

about aren't anything you haven't been facing since your arrival in the Vale. What is it about the warning of the Hemlock Witch that's shaken you so?"

"You always see right through me," Ashlynn said, her lush lips brushing across Nyrielle's collarbone as she spoke. "Even when I'm too lost in my own thoughts to see clearly, you always do."

"I feel your heartbeat within my chest," Nyrielle reminded her lover as she gently stroked the young woman's silky hair. "We share our dreams during the day, and our bodies at night. How could I not see clearly when the woman I love is troubled by something she's afraid to put into words?"

"But we're facing the dangers of the world together, my darling," she whispered, placing a feather-light kiss on the crown of Ashlynn's head. "And that includes the dangers of the heart. So tell me, and even if I cannot help you solve the worry, I can share it with you, and we can face this worry together too."

"I love you," Ashlynn breathed as she shifted her position in bed, stretching upward until she could brush her lips across Nyrielle's, tasting the other woman's sweetness as she hungered for the warmth and reassurance of her lover's touch.

A trace of a smile flickered across Nyrielle's lips before she yielded to her lover's needs, parting her lips and savoring the taste that thrilled her more than any dish she'd ever sampled. Her fingers slid through Ashlynn's hair, cradling and supporting her head while her other hand slid along her lover's shoulders, descending to the curve at the small of her back to pull her more deeply into the kiss.

Time melted away between them as Nyrielle answered her lover's fears with soft touches and deep kisses. She had to struggle against her hunger to keep from pricking Ashlynn's lips and spilling blood into their kiss, but this was a moment for comfort, not passion, and Nyrielle refused to allow her bloodthirst to taint a moment when Ashlynn had turned to her for support.

Eventually, the intensity of the moment faded, and Ashlynn pulled back from the embrace. Her face was flushed, and her breathing had grown unsteady, but her heart no longer trembled with the same intense fear and worry that had plagued her moments ago.

A kiss couldn't cure her of the anxieties that plagued her, but it gave her the strength she needed to face them, and put her at ease enough to share them with the woman who meant more to her than anyone else in the world.

"I wanted to transform Lothian March into the kind of paradise that Isabell mentioned creating in her trial," Ashlynn confessed. "I, I thought that, if I could transform the lives of the common people... If I could make things better for them in as many ways as possible, then they would be able to accept life alongside the Eldritch."

She knew how much people in Lothian March struggled, and a century of Lothian rule, marked by once-a-generation wars, hadn't done anything to make their lives better. Every generation, families were broken, and the lucky ones who survived the war returned home with scars on their bodies and their hearts.

Then, everyone who survived the war scrambled to pick up the pieces, carrying on as best they could. No one was thriving except for the lords who squeezed out heavy tithes to fund the wars, siphoning off the excess to enrich themselves, and a handful of merchants who profited by trading war materials.

But putting a stop to the wars wouldn't be enough... And it wasn't a promise that Ashlynn could realistically make in the short term. She could stop the wars against the Eldritch, but she would only be replacing them with new wars against the Church and the Kingdom of Gaal. So, if she couldn't deliver prosperity simply by ending the wars with the Eldritch, she would have to look elsewhere for ways to turn the wheel of wealth faster, and she'd hoped to do so with witchcraft.

There were more than a hundred villages and towns in Lothian March alone, plus all the Eldritch settlements that had been fenced in by constant human expansion. If Ashlynn and her coven spent a year or two visiting every one of them, healing the sick where they could, mending what was broken that could be mended, and leaving behind seeds that would flourish like no other, then she was certain that she could win over the people of the March in a few short years...

But the scale of it was staggering, and from what Isabell had implied, working on that kind of scale would tip the balance of nature's delicate scales far too much, provoking inevitable calamities. Just making the attempt could destroy the very people she intended to help.

She was grateful for the Hemlock's warning, but at the same time, it left her feeling powerless to help the people who needed it most. And without some kind of transformation to bind them together, she was afraid that she'd plunge the entire region into pockets of unrest and bloody civil war like the one Isabell had fought in the Emerald Kingdom across the sea.

"It feels... hopeless," Ashlynn said as she clung to Nyrielle for strength. "I have all of this power at my fingertips, but if I use it... Then I'll just provoke new disasters."

"Will you?" Nyrielle asked, frowning at her lover. "You told me about Isabell's trial and her warning, but that isn't the way I understood it at all."

"Oh?" Ashlynn asked, blinking several times in surprise. "Then... how did you understand the warning?"

"I think the warning was meant more for Isabell than for you," Nyrielle said as she gently stroked Ashlynn's hair. "Didn't you say that she sacrificed her power over fire in order to prevent herself from using it as a weapon the way she had in the last war she fought? I think that your newest witch fears her own strength because she'd allowed others to guide its use," Nyrielle explained.

"From what you've told me of her, the war she fought in was every bit as terrible as the one that nearly destroyed the Vale of Mists," Nyrielle said. "So she's both walled herself off from the power she used to destroy, and she's taken on all of the responsibility for using her power, placing all of the burden on her own shoulders."

"But I think the warning she was meant to receive was that she can't create the kind of future she wants to build if she does it all by herself," Nyrielle said. "Certainly, doing too much and throwing things out of balance can invite disasters, but that's when you must turn to the others you rely on. You have to be stronger together if you wish to transform the world..."

"After all," she said with a soft, comforting smile. "Hasn't one of your predecessors reshaped the world before? Why can't you and your coven do it again?"

"Done it before?" Ashlynn said, furrowing her brow as she tried to think about which of her predecessors could be said to have reshaped the world. But when she did, her mouth dropped open in shock as she stared at Nyrielle in disbelief.

"You're talking about the Mother of Forests," Ashlynn whispered, raising a hand to her chest and feeling the faint scar that had grown slightly larger each time she nurtured a seed of witchcraft for a member of her small coven. "You're talking about the greatest Mother of Trees to ever live..."

Chapter 1055: The Mother of Forests (Part One)

The Mother of Forests wasn't a figure that Ashlynn had expected Nyrielle to be familiar with, or at least, that's what she thought when she first learned about the greatest of her predecessors from Amahle in the Briar.

But when she thought about it, especially in light of what they'd learned about Shubnalu's teacher, Acat, then it made sense that Nyrielle's teacher would be familiar with the witch who helped the world recover from the devastation of the Age of Ice.

Ashlynn shifted slightly, nestling deeper into Nyrielle's embrace as she processed the implications. The silk sheets whispered against her skin, cool where the blankets didn't cover them, warm everywhere Nyrielle's body pressed against hers. She could feel her lover's fingers tracing idle patterns along her shoulder blade in a soothing, almost unconscious gesture that helped her thoughts settle into place.

If Ashlynn understood the sequence of events clearly enough, then Shubnalu might even have had a chance to meet the Mother of Forests before she planted her final seed and passed on her mantle for the next Mother of Trees to be born.

"I know you believe in me," Ashlynn said with a wry smile on her lips. She reached up to touch Nyrielle's face, her fingertips grazing along the vampire's cool cheek before tucking a strand of dark hair behind her ear and lingering for a moment to caress her lover's cheek. "But expecting me to match up to the Mother of Forests is a bit much, isn't it? She didn't just heal a people, she healed the world..."

The scale of transformation the Mother of Forests had wrought in her lifetime was a legend among witches for a reason. Only the Father of Calamities could be said to have done as much to reshape the world, and everyone acknowledged that he was unique among witches, unrivaled in his ability to release world shaping power in a single instant. But he was also greatly limited in other ways, while the Mother of Forests seemed to have no limits at all.

Nyrielle's hand slid down from Ashlynn's shoulder to rest against the small of her back, her palm warm against the softness of Ashlynn's bare skin. She pulled Ashlynn closer, closing the small gap that had formed between them during the conversation, as if to anchor her lover in the intimate comfort of this moment, even as their conversation grew larger and more serious in scope.

"And you think the world isn't in need of healing now?" Nyrielle asked with a raised brow.

She lifted one hand to cup Ashlynn's face, her thumb brushing gently across her lover's sculpted brow before her hand settled gently on Ashlynn's cheek. The emerald light from the bedside lamp caught in Ashlynn's eyes, making them glow like polished gemstones, and for a moment Nyrielle simply looked at her, as if she were memorizing the exact shade and sparkle to recreate it in one of her paintings before she continued speaking.

"If Amahle is correct, then humans have stolen the power of two Oracles, and they've bound away the power of a third. That leaves only two Oracles free to walk the world, and neither of them have been seen in my lifetime. For all we know, they're captives of the Church as well."

"You and I," Nyrielle said, sliding a hand down Ashlynn's arm until she could clasp the other woman's hand. "We're drawing a line in the sand against the Church. We know that they'll strike back after we take Lothian March away from them, and we know they won't stop until the price to keep fighting us becomes higher than we're willing to pay."

"This tragedy was born long ago," Nyrielle whispered as she pulled Ashlynn close. "They've already broken the balance by usurping the power of the Oracles. Perhaps there would be a reason to hold yourself back if we weren't facing the champions of the Church, but..."

Even though she left it unsaid, both women understood the stakes of the war they were provoking painfully well. The Church had launched two Crusades since humans first arrived on this continent. The First Crusade had unified disparate colonies, including the one founded by Ashlynn's ancestor, forging the Kingdom of Gaal and driving the Eldritch from their borders.

The Second Crusade had substantially expanded the borders of the Kingdom of Gaal, establishing four Marches at the limits of human expansion and nearly destroying the Vale of Mists in the process. In the two hundred years since the First Crusade, the Kingdom of Gaal had never once ceded territory back to the Eldritch, and the Church never hesitated to dispatch their mightiest forces to make sure it stayed that way.

"But they'll send Exemplars after us soon enough," Ashlynn said with a heavy sigh as she contemplated how the Church would respond to her actions. "And the Saint in the Holy City himself will likely move before this ends. So, you think that I should do as I planned because the disaster is coming either way?" Ashlynn asked.

"Not as you planned," Nyrielle said, shaking her head gently. "But as the Mother of Forests did. How many witches were you planning to bring into your coven?"

"Six, or, seven maybe," Ashlynn said. "Amahle only has five in her coven, so seven already feels large. She says that the Mother of Storms rarely has more than five, and it's similar for the Mother of Tides."

Ashlynn's coven had grown rapidly, gaining four witches within a year with a fifth ready to face his trial as soon as Ashlynn received the seed she was waiting for from Amahle's coven. Compared to her teacher, the rate at which she was establishing her coven was extraordinary, especially for the coven of the Mother of Trees.

Some of her predecessors had only added a witch to their covens once a decade, and they might spend half of their life surrounded by the same group of four to six witches. By contrast, Ashlynn was racing toward a full coven as if she were in the middle of a forest fire, trying to save potential witches before they were consumed by the flames.

But if one was to speak of the Mother of Forests... then that was a different matter entirely.

Chapter 1056: The Mother of Forests (Part Two)

"The Mother of Forests had twenty witches in her coven," Nyrielle said, gazing into Ashlynn's emerald eyes as she watched the thoughts turning over in her mind. "She spread them across the world to reclaim the soil of the earth from frozen wasteland, and every year, the scattered, surviving Eldritch clans grew stronger because of the gifts her trees provided to the people..."

"Twenty one," Ashlynn said with a faint smile. "She had seven witches of the branch, seven of the nut and seven of the fruit. She gave the people strong wood to shelter them from the cold and to burn hot through the winter nights, hearty nuts to last through winters that were still far too long, and sweet fruits to delight them and give them hope for brighter days."

"If there was a witch that even the Church would have to call a Saintess, then she was the one," Ashlynn said in tones of deep admiration. She'd been called 'Saintess' by more than one human who didn't understand the truth of power in this world, but she'd never once felt worthy of the title. In her mind, a person became a Saint or Saintess because of their deeds, not because of the power they held, and she hadn't done anything remotely worthy of that much respect.

"It was a long time ago," Ashlynn said, though perhaps to Nyrielle and the other True Vampires, it hadn't been that long. "Even Amahle doesn't have many records from the era of the Mother of Forests. But she said that what the Mother of Forests did, cultivating a coven of that size, was incredibly dangerous, and she and her coven would have died countless times over without the protection of the Sovereign of Stars and his Celestial Court."

"Jalal's people refer to them as the 'First Ones'," Nyrielle said, biting her lower lip as she wondered if Sybyll had been successful in keeping her neighboring Eldritch Lord away from the battlefield. Knowing Jalal, she doubted it. The old cat had too many reasons to draw his blades and dance with death against Ian Hanrahan's forces to stay his hand. Hopefully, his blood hadn't grown so hot that he got himself in trouble in the battle for Hanrahan Town.

"I've been thinking about the end of the Age of Ice a great deal since I found my teacher's writings in the tomb of Hauke's ancestors," Nyrielle said. "It took all three of our powers to bring the Eldritch peoples back from the brink. Vampires to end the Age of Ice, an Oracle to lead people back into the world and help them live together, and a Witch to transform the world into one that they could live in again..."

"You think the Church is another catastrophe, like the Age of Ice?" Ashlynn asked. In truth, she hadn't put as much thought into the secrets that Amahle had shared with her as Nyrielle had. Too much of her focus had been on preparation for her upcoming conflict with the Lothians to think much about the power the Church had stolen and the greater implications of that theft, but, when Nyrielle drew the parallel so clearly, it was hard to ignore.

The Age of Ice happened because a clan of Frost Walkers with Iridescent Horns did something to fundamentally alter the order of the world, covering much of it in sheets of ice that were as thick as mountains were tall. By the time the ice receded, maps had to be redrawn. Whole rivers, valleys and inland seas had been destroyed by the ice, and new ones carved in their place.

Now, the Church had stolen the power of multiple Oracles, breaking the cycle that allowed that power to return to the world when one Oracle died, and preventing a new one from being born among the people who most needed their guidance. Doing so allowed humanity to conquer the old countries, and to cross the seas to do it again... but everyone else was diminished because of it.

"Twenty one witches," Ashlynn whispered as she considered Nyrielle's words. "Do you really think I could raise so many?"

"I doubt that most people could," Nyrielle said as she pulled Ashlynn's hand up between them, pressing it between her breasts so that Ashlynn could feel her beating heart. "But you plant seeds of deep love and admiration in the people whose lives you touch. Just look at how much young Ollie has transformed since meeting you, and ask yourself if he would have done the same if the witch he'd encountered had been Amahle."

As Nyrielle spoke, Ashlynn felt the strong, steady beat of her lover's heart just beneath her palm. It was the same beat that echoed in her own chest, helping to keep her grounded and steady even as the magnitude of Nyrielle's suggestion made her heart tremble and shake.

"I've seen the way people you've helped look toward you, long after you've left the room," Nyrielle said. "I've heard them speak of you when you aren't around. From the hunter, Eamon, to Sir Tommin's wife, Rosie, you've swept up several people who would dedicate their lives to helping your cause if you had a place for them..."

"To me, the question isn't whether you can raise twenty-one witches or not," Nyrielle said confidently. "The question is whether or not you'll stop at twenty-one. And if you provoke a calamity by trying," she added as she gently stroked Ashlynn's cheek. "Then I promise to fight by your side."

"I know you're not the Mother of Forests," Nyrielle said quietly as she pressed her forehead up against Ashlynn's. "You won't be content to be protected the way the Sovereign of Stars is said to have protected the Mother of Forests and her coven. You'll fight on the front lines alongside your witches. But you won't fight alone," she promised.

"I'll always be at your side, even if the entire world turns against us. Because I love you," Nyrielle whispered, closing her eyes and savoring the warmth of Ashlynn's touch along with her unique, evergreen scent. "I love you, and nothing else matters more than you..."

Chapter 1057: Preparing for Reunions (Part One)

A full day and a half had passed since Ashlynn and Nyrielle discussed the legendary Mother of Forests and the meaning of Isabell's warning. They hadn't made any decisions that night, though Nyrielle had made a few suggestions for expanding Ashlynn's coven.

"I, I'm not sure yet," Ashlynn said, biting her lower lip and holding Nyrielle closely as she considered how much her coven would change if it grew so large and so quickly.

Part of her wanted to press ahead quickly, to prevent large gaps from forming between the first members of her coven and any newcomers. But she forced herself to hold back from that impulse. She was in the middle of a winter war and her mind was still clouded by her need for vengeance and her worries about Jocelynn.

Once this was over, once she returned to Lothian City and began the process of blending the human and Eldritch worlds, she could think about expanding her coven again. Spring was a time for new growth and the right time for planting new seedlings. Winter, this winter at least, was a time to bring things to an end, so that they could begin anew next year.

When the messenger finally arrived, hours after dawn, carrying a detailed letter from Heila explaining the events of the battle for Hanrahan town, and the public and private trials that had taken place afterward, Ashlynn realized that some things would be much harder to conclude than she'd hoped for.

She'd never expected that Loman would turn out to be such a formidable sorcerer, or that he would be callous enough to sacrifice so many people in his attempt to defend Hanrahan Town from Dame Sybyll's forces. Thankfully, she'd sent both Heila and Hauke to bolster the army's ability to contend with the sorcery of the Church, but hearing about the battle and its aftermath, she couldn't help but wonder if she should have gone herself in order to neutralize her brother-in-law.

Of course, Loman wasn't the only one of her enemies who hadn't come through the battle unscathed. Now, as Ashlynn gathered with a small group in the courtyard of the Ancient Fortress, her eyes fell on the other person who had come to reunite with a family member who had stood on the other side of the battle.

Ashlynn had already told Rosie Pyre about Sir Tommin's injuries, though Rosie had yet to tell her son, Tonnis, what had happened. She wanted to see her husband for herself and speak with him at least once before she decided whether or not to allow him back into her life.

When she announced her decision to join Ashlynn in receiving the captives from Hanrahan, there had been an intense, lively debate among the friends she'd made in the village about who would accompany her.

"I'll watch over you, Lady Rosie," Constable Daithi said as soon as the question came up. "I know your husband well enough to know that he's not usually a violent man, but a wounded soldier isn't the same

man as he was before," he said, speaking from years of experience following Sir Broll, Sir Tommin, and Lord Owain to a number of battlefields.

"Kind men can turn into monsters when they're laid low by their injuries," the constable said as gently as he could. "And the taller they stand on the field, the more monstrous they can become when they lose their place in the world. Your husband was, is, a great man, so I'm sure he's suffering greatly right now."

"You can't do that, Constable," Samira protested from her place resting near the fire. One hand rested on her large belly while the other held an unfinished carving that Noomi had set aside in order to tend to her infant son, Saku.

Sir Ollie had opened his home in the village to both women, claiming that he would be too busy with Lady Ashlynn's coven and the war to make much use of it, and when Rosie had arrived with her son, Tonnis, it seemed natural for her to join the other refugees who wouldn't be able to start work on homes of their own until the spring.

Now, they'd all gathered to hear Lady Ashlynn's news of the battle in Hanrahan and to support the newest member of their rapidly growing community as she learned the fate of her husband... and they all seemed to have opinions about who should be at Rosie's side when she confronted the husband who had abandoned her to face Owain's schemes alone.

"I know you mean well," Samira added quickly. "But noblemen see things differently than common folk do. If you're standing beside Lady Rosie as her guardian when Sir Tommin returns, they may think you've cuckolded him," she said, blushing at the memory of the time she'd accidentally implied something very similar about Owain Lothian while she was masquerading as Ashlynn.

Since then, she'd learned a great deal about the aristocracy and the subtle ways that the nobility could communicate the most shocking things in plain sight, and choosing to welcome her wounded husband home from a war with another man at her side was a sure way to tell everyone around Sir Tommin that his wife had forsaken him for another man.

"What? That's absurd!" Daithi said, blinking in surprise that it would create any kind of an issue for him to help protect a vulnerable woman. "I'm the constable of this village now," he reminded Samira. "Even if she's only just arrived, she's still one of Sir Ollie's villagers. How would it create an offense if I went along to protect her."

"That doesn't make it any better, it only makes it worse," Samira insisted. "A constable should know better. She should be attended by a proper handmaiden. I'll go with you, Lady Rosie, I know what..."

"You'll do no such thing," Noomi insisted, setting down the weaning spoon she'd been using to feed Saku while her tail thumped rapidly against the soft rug beneath her. "If she needs to be attended by a handmaiden then I can go. You can watch over Saku for me and..."

"Enough," a sharp, commanding woman's voice interrupted them. "I know you both want to help, but you should tend to your own little ones," Sionid said, squeezing Daithi's hand to let her husband know that she would settle things.

"Lady Rosie should be attended by someone of appropriate status, who isn't a man," she said with a pointed glance at Daithi who still looked offended that he couldn't stand up for a woman in need of protection. "Since Sir Ollie hasn't taken a wife yet, and there's no other women with sufficient status available, then I'll accompany her," she said with the same firmness that she would use when laying down the law of the house for her daughter, Bailey.

"I can still come along," Daithi offered before a trio of feminine gazes landed on him, all but physically forcing him to raise his hands in retreat. "What I meant to say is that I'll watch over Tonnis for you, Lady Rosie," he said quickly. "Bailey can't wait to show him her favorite creek now that he's recovered enough from the poison to spend time outside."

For all his bravery and courage, and all the respect he'd gained as the constable of Ollie's village, he knew better than to keep speaking once Sionid had made up her mind. Besides, after following Lady Ashlynn on her mission to destroy the Lothian's summer Villa, he was glad to be home and an excuse to spend the day with Bailey was just what he needed to soothe the wounds and fears in his own heart...

Chapter 1058: Preparing for Reunions (Part Two)

While Sionid's decision technically settled matters, Rosie herself was still trying to understand why this group of strangers had become so invested in protecting her, particularly when the only danger she might face was her own husband. It was true that he'd been badly injured in his duel with Dame Sybyll, and according to Lady Ashlynn, he'd been permanently blinded when his own Holy Light Blade turned against him.

She shouldn't be in any kind of danger, especially with Lady Ashlynn and Sir Ollie both planning to be present when Tommin arrived, and yet she felt like she'd been one step away from the village assembling an honor guard for her.

"Why are you all going so far for me?" Rosie asked Sionid once she had a chance to pull the constable's wife aside. "I've only been here a few days, and it isn't like I'm some high-born noblewoman. If I hadn't been married to Tommin, I'd have no status at all. So why make such a fuss over me?"

"I think you underestimate how important you are, Lady Rosie," Sionid said as she examined the latest 'interesting' individual to join their community of refugees and former captives. "Lady Ashlynn clearly values you very highly or she wouldn't have sent two vampires, especially Madame Zedya, all the way to Hurel to rescue you."

"Then, Lady Ashlynn personally cured you and your son of one of the most deadly poisons known to the Eldritch clans," Sionid explained. "We have a few members of the Nightweaver Clan in this village and everyone here knows how dangerous their venom can be, and how hard it is to cure once it's taken hold for several days."

"So is it any wonder that the people here think that Lady Ashlynn must value you highly?" Sionid asked. "And if that's the case, is it any surprise that they would be so quick to protect you?"

"But... But I'm just a nobody," Rosie insisted. "I'm worse than that," she added, shaking her head in a complete rejection of the idea that she was somehow special. "Lady Ashlynn just wanted me to write to Tommin, to try to convince him not to fight. And... and I refused. I didn't even do what she asked me to."

She hated her weakness, and even more, her selfishness in refusing the request of the Saintess who had saved her son's life and hers as well. She understood that Lady Ashlynn was a person who had taken protecting life, all life, even the life of her enemies, as her struggle. She wanted to help in that struggle in any way that she could, but when it came to protecting the man who had abandoned her to Owain's schemes... she just couldn't.

Tommin put his faith above everything, and when he left her to take up the sword of a Templar, he'd never looked back. Never once visited her or their son. Never wrote. Never even sent word that he was riding off once again to fight against the Eldritch, this time at Lord Loman's side instead of Lord Owain's.

So when Lady Ashlynn asked her to write to him, to convince him to stand down in this fight, Rosie couldn't bring herself to do it. Tommin had chosen his faith. If he wanted someone to protect him, then he should turn to his Holy Lord of Light.

"After she did so much for me," Rosie said as moisture began to collect in her eyes. "And I've done nothing at all for her... To say that I'm someone worthy of all of this attention. It's just a bit too much. I, I'm lucky I haven't been thrown in the dungeons for refusing to help Lady Ashlynn," she said.

"No, you haven't done anything to deserve that," Sionid said gently, wrapping her arms around the other woman in a tender embrace. "Lady Ashlynn is different. The Eldritch are different. Even when someone is your enemy, once the battle is over, the victor cares for the defeated. But you were never Lady Ashlynn's enemy, your husband was, and she knows the difference."

"If you truly want to do something to honor the gift that Lady Ashlynn has given you," Sionid added a moment later. "Think carefully about her offer to let you care for Sir Tommin. It's your choice to allow him back into your life or not. Lady Ashlynn didn't save your life just to bind you to a husband who doesn't love you... I think we all know how she feels about her own husband."

"She gave you and Tonniss back your lives to live for yourself," Sionid said firmly. "If you want to accept Sir Tommin back, you can... but Lady Ashlynn will not force you to. And if you need support, all of us here will help to watch over you."

"How is it that you became so wise?" Rosie asked, looking at Sionid in confusion. She was probably older than the other woman, at least by a few years, but somehow, Sionid seemed much more... prepared for this conversation than she would have expected.

"Lady Rosie, I know you've been married to a knight for a long time," Sionid said delicately, taking a deep breath to steady herself before saying something she never would have dared to say to the wife of a knight before arriving in the Vale of Mists. But, as she'd been explaining, things were different here.

"You've been married to a knight for a long time, but until recently, Lord Owain has never lost a knight in battle," Sionid said. "But the number of common soldiers who have died is... very high, and the number who returned from his raids with crippling injuries is even higher. The wives of all those soldiers, you think we never talked to each other? Never had to protect each other when someone fell to drink after they could no longer raise their shield or mount their horse?"

"My husband isn't the only one who understands what happens when a soldier is hurt the way Sir Tommin was," Sionid added gently. "So, whatever you decide to do, if you need help, please know that you don't have to face him alone. Not tomorrow, and not ever."

At the time, it had been immensely comforting for Rosie to hear, and it had given her the courage she needed to join Lady Ashlynn and Sir Ollie in the courtyard where they awaited the return of Lady Heila with the prisoners they'd taken in Hanrahan Town.

But now that the carriage was clattering across the cobblestones, drawing closer with every breath, she found herself reaching out for Sionid's hand, clutching it firmly, as if she would topple over without the other woman's support.

Rosie had considered a thousand different things to say to Tommin once she finally saw him again, but which words she used would depend on Tommin and how he appeared once he emerged from the carriage...

Chapter 1059: A Long Carriage Ride (Part One)

The carriage ride from Hanrahan Town to the Vale of Mists was both the longest and the strangest that Loman had ever experienced. Despite traveling at speeds that should have been impossible through the darkness of night, with only brief stops to rest the horses, the journey felt like it would never end, as though once he'd entered the carriage, the days before he started the journey were long ago, and the end of the journey was in a distant, unimaginable future.

Behind them, a second carriage carried Hauke, Liam Dunn, and Hugo Hanrahan, along with several Eldritch soldiers who served as guards for their small convoy. The presence of that second carriage, filled with other human noblemen, should have been a comfort. A reminder that he wasn't alone in this strange venture into the most dangerous of demon infested lands, but instead it only emphasized how far they'd fallen, and how completely their world had been turned upside down after a single, catastrophic battle.

He'd made the incredible journey all the way from Lothian March to the Holy City, once in each direction, on a trip that took several weeks, but that trip was nothing compared to the one he was taking now.

As a child leaving the march, he'd felt like every day was a new wonder. There were new villages and towns to see, new dishes to eat, and most important to the child he'd been, there were new temples to

visit. At every stop along the way, his excitement only grew as he saw first hand what the rich interior of the Kingdom of Gaal was truly like. A journey that took more than a month felt like it was over before it had begun.

As a young man returning home, the journey had lost its sense of wonder, but it gained something else in its place. He saw the world with wiser eyes that sought out the flaws and the cracks in the world. He saw people in need of guidance and salvation, and the further they moved from the heart of the kingdom, the greater the need appeared.

By the time he returned home to Lothian City, he was ready to dedicate himself to caring for the wounded and broken survivors of the last war, and to ensuring that the next one would be the last. The young man who returned from the Holy City wanted nothing more than to drive the demons from their lands forever, so that Lothian March, whether it became a Lothian Duchy or not, could enjoy the peace and prosperity he'd seen first hand in the towns around the Holy City and the Royal Capital.

The comforts he enjoyed on both of those journeys, however, had mostly been limited to the times when the carriage stopped in towns or villages, or even the mid-day camps that sprung up when the caravan that accompanied the man who was both a young lord and the disciple of an Exemplar stopped to rest.

The carriages themselves, even if they were well made and luxuriously appointed, still bounced uncomfortably along the rough roads that connected much of the Kingdom of Gaal, and no amount of cushioning could ever make up for long hours spent sitting on what amounted to a wooden box with a pillow on top of it.

By comparison, the carriage he rode in now was far more comfortable than anything he'd traveled in before. The interior was surprisingly luxurious, with soft padded seats that cradled his weary body, polished wood paneling that gleamed in the soft light of oil lamps mounted on the walls, and silk curtains covering the windows that blocked out the darkness of the winter night.

The oil lamps provided not just illumination but a gentle warmth that pushed back against the winter cold outside, creating a bubble of comfort that felt almost surreal given their circumstances.

At times, he could almost forget that he was in a carriage at all, especially when the diminutive witch unfolded a panel of the wall into a small table so they could share a simple meal of cured meats, dried fruits, hard cheeses and soft bread. In those moments, he felt more like he was taking a meal in the

private booth of a small cafe than hurtling along one of the ancient roads that predated his family's arrival in these lands.

Yet, even though the carriage ride from Hanrahan to the Vale of Mists was also filled with new experiences, none of them brought him comfort or joy, and instead of the bright anticipation of a child or the growing determination of a young man, Loman's heart was gripped by the icy hand of looming dread as each turn of the carriage's wheels brought them closer to the mysterious Mother of Trees, and her master, the Demon Lady of the Vale.

It would have been easier if he could pretend that he was a man like Sir Tommin, who had fought with all his strength against the demons, only to be laid low by dark magic and taken prisoner.

The knight sitting next to him in the carriage had sunk into his own world of darkness, sleeping when exhaustion claimed him and waking with frightened cries or heart-rending sobs as he struggled against whatever nightmares haunted him.

Diarmuid had tried coaxing the wounded Templar to eat, fashioning small finger sandwiches out of the bread, cured meat and cheese, or guiding Tommin's calloused hand to a small wooden cup of dried fruits, but at most, the man had taken a few sips of water before slumping back into his seat and leaning against the side of the carriage to sleep.

But at least Sir Tommin could say that he had come by his wounds and his suffering as a devoted servant of the Holy Lord of Light. In a way, Loman envied the man. Tommin's faith had remained pure, untainted by violence against his own fellows right up until the moment that his faith crumbled in a duel against the Crimson Knight. Though, from the look of him, perhaps Sir Tommin would have preferred to die in that duel... and Loman could understand at least a portion of why the man would feel that way.

Raising his only remaining hand to the point of his left shoulder where his left arm had once been, Loman's fingers probed gently at the freshly healed wound while his heart was torn between wonder and horror at how much he'd recovered since Dame Sybill tore his arm from its socket as punishment for the crime of sacrificing temple acolytes for the power to fight back against the demons.

"Does it still hurt?" a soft, feminine voice asked from the seat opposite him in the small interior of the carriage. "If there's pain at the shoulder, I have a salve that you can apply," the diminutive witch offered.

"But, if you feel like there's pain in the arm that you've lost then there's nothing I can do to ease it. Your body needs to learn that the arm is gone, and that may take months or even years," she said, looking as though the statement pained her greatly, even as her grass green eyes met his with the pure clarity of a healer who would not lie to her patient.

It was a look that Loman had worn on his own face often enough, but he'd never expected to see it directed at him, much less from a demon witch.

Chapter 1060: A Long Carriage Ride (Part Two)

"There's no pain," Loman said as his hand moved to the scars across the face and the silk patch that covered his left eye. "None of it hurts," he admitted, speaking softly as the wonder in his heart overtook the horror. "At least, not physically. Your miracle... Your miracle of healing is very strong."

"It isn't a miracle," Heila said, shaking her head and refusing to let him refer to what she'd done using the terms the Church favored. She'd gotten a taste of the reverence humans looked at Lady Ashlynn with after experiencing her witchcraft, and she wanted nothing to do with that kind of misguided worship.

"You might say that," Loman disagreed. "But what Dame Sybyll did to me, only the Saint himself, or perhaps Exemplar Lyn Cattell, the Emissary of the Ascended Physician, could have healed this well. And the price for such a miracle," he said with a shudder. "Well, I suppose my curse will be revealed in time. I imagine it won't be light."

"Curse?" Heila said, cocking her head to the side in confusion. "There's no curse. The price of your healing isn't borne by you, but by the trees who offered themselves up to nourish your body and mend your flesh. I, I don't know if the grove at Dame Sybyll's castle will recover after healing you," she admitted, hanging her head low. "But there was no other way."

"If she'd let me take you to the forest before doing that," she muttered before cutting herself off. What was done was done, and it couldn't be taken back to be done better. Still, she felt like she owed them at least some explanation, if for no other reason than to help them understand Lady Ashlynn when they finally learned who the Mother of Trees was.

"The reason I took the people who were wounded in the battle to the forest before we left was so I could borrow the strength of the entire forest to heal them," she explained. After the battle, she'd

provided what healing she could, but much of it was limited to applying salves and ointments, stitching up wounds and applying bandages.

She'd prepared several crates worth of potions in advance of the battle and used them all when the Church refused to heal the men of Hanrahan who had already been touched by her healing witchcraft during the battle. But to help the soldiers of both sides to truly recover before she left Hanrahan Town had required something greater.

"In a forest, I can borrow a little bit of strength from dozens, even hundreds of trees," she explained. "When the trees are old and strong, with deep roots and a strong connection to the power of the earth, I only need to borrow a little bit from each one in order to heal someone. It's the same thing that I've been doing when we stop to rest the horses," she said, since she'd seen them watching her from the windows every time the carriages stop.

It was unlikely that they'd encounter any resistance on the trip back to the Vale of Mists. The closest village they would pass by belonged to Sir Carwyn, and he had already sworn to serve Dame Sybyll, and by extension, the Vale of Mists. But no one who had grown up in the Vale of Mists felt comfortable passing through human lands, and there were reasons beyond simple safety that prompted Heila to use witchcraft to speed them on their way back to the Vale.

"If I just ask the plants along the roadside for a little bit of their strength, I can help the horses to recover faster, the way a flower perks up with a bit of water and sun," Heila said, speaking as though it were common sense. "But when there aren't many trees or growing things around, it takes more from each one to do the same thing. We, we don't like to do that," she said, biting her lower lip as she remembered how frail the trees in the castle grove felt when she was done healing Loman's injuries.

"We don't like to draw too much on just one tree, but in times of need, to save a life, we will," she said resolutely as she looked back up at Loman, meeting his gaze directly. "I don't know what you've been told about Witches, Lord Loman," she said instead. "But we don't curse the people we heal. We aren't monsters."

"It, it isn't about being a monster," Diarmuid said carefully from his seat next to the diminutive witch. He'd spent half of the carriage ride lost in his own thoughts, and much of the rest of it helping to care for the blinded Sir Tommin, but he'd been looking for a way to engage the horned witch in more conversation, and this seemed like as good an opportunity as any.

"What Disciple Loman said about Exemplar Cattell is true," Diarmuid explained. "But healing wounds that would otherwise claim a man's life means altering his destiny. For a man to live who should have died will always require a price to be paid, either by the healer or by their patient."

"Oh," Heila said, as if she didn't entirely believe their words but didn't want to argue about them. Inwardly, however, her mind raced as she tried to recall every scrap of conversation she could from the few times she'd spoken about sorcery with Aspakos.

He'd also talked about being cursed and paying a terrible price for using the sorcery left behind by an Oracle, but he always said that he wasn't a healer. He and Erkembalt had needed Lady Ashlynn's witchcraft in order to free Hauke from the curse of the Frost Walker ancestors, but perhaps there were other reasons for that as well.

After all, Aspakos was only a sorcerer, he wasn't a member of an Oracle's Celestial Court the way an Exemplar should be. The extent of his power should be much more limited than the greatest champions of the Church.

"When Mother A-, er, when the Mother of Trees and I met Auntie Amahle to learn witchcraft," Heila said carefully, nearly stumbling into revealing Ashlynn's name before she caught herself. "We thought that a witch's coven was similar to a vampire's progeny. I grew up in the Vale of Mists, and the Mother of Trees is the Seneschal of a True Vampire," she explained, though from the confused looks Diarmuid and Loman were giving her it was clear that they were unfamiliar with some of the terms she used.

"It took time to learn that things that seem similar on the surface can be very different underneath," Heila said, pushing forward with her explanation despite their confusion. "A witch's healing isn't the same as an oracle's. It doesn't require the same sort of price. That doesn't mean there isn't a price to be paid," Heila added quickly, lest they misunderstand.

"It's just that things are different for us than they are for you," she said. "I, I hope you can remember that when we get to the Vale of Mists. Whatever your Church taught you about us, we're different from that. Even when things may look similar on the surface, and it might look like we're defiling something you consider sacred," she added carefully as she tried to consider how Ignatious would explain it if he were here.

"We're not trying to defile anything of yours," she said with growing confidence in her words. "It's just that we have something sacred of our own, and it looks similar to something of yours. So... so please, when we get to the Vale, please keep your hearts and your minds open. I think that, if we can learn how

to share the things that are similar, we won't... we won't have to tear each other apart anymore," she said as her eyes fell on Loman's missing arm and disfigured face.

It was a simple, genuine plea, and one that neither Loman or Diarmuid could easily respond to. They'd both been steeped in the traditions of their faith for almost their entire lives. But as the carriage trundled ever closer to the Vale of Mists and their meeting with the powerful Mother of Trees, both men couldn't help but ponder Heila's words.

After all... they'd just learned how much they didn't know about the people they'd spent their entire lives preparing to fight, and that lesson had been filled with pain, loss, and arguably unnecessary sacrifice. No one wanted to see another battle like the one they'd just been through.

But could they really put aside hundreds of years of constant wars, just because they found a few pieces of common ground? Neither man knew... but soon, they would arrive in the Vale of Mists, and they'd learn firsthand how much they really had in common with their ancient enemies.